

**AMERICAN LIVES** **Mary Harris “Mother” Jones**  
*Labor’s Inspiration*

*“The workers asked only for bread and a shortening of long hours of toil. The agitators gave them visions. The police gave them clubs.”—The Autobiography of Mother Jones (1925)*

**M**ary Harris “Mother” Jones was a short woman whose grandmotherly looks hid a steely determination and a fiery tongue. She put both to use in her quest for workers’ rights.

Mary Harris was born in Ireland in 1830 and emigrated with her family to Canada when she was 11. They settled in the United States some years later, and she worked at teaching and dressmaking. In 1861, she married George Jones, an iron worker and devoted union man. They had four children, but tragedy struck. Jones and all the children died in an 1867 Memphis yellow-fever epidemic. Later Mary Jones remembered bitterly that the victims of the epidemic “were mainly among the poor and the workers. The rich and the well-to-do fled the city.” She moved to Chicago to work as a dressmaker again—and then lost everything in the great fire that destroyed much of that city in 1871.

Wandering the devastated city, Jones stopped into a union meeting hall. It belonged to the Knights of Labor, a union that tried to organize both skilled and unskilled workers. She began to attend regularly, and she soon fully embraced the cause. At one meeting, she entered in a lively debate with a Knights of Labor official. He asked to speak to her afterwards and was impressed by her awareness of labor issues. He was Terence Powderly, soon to be the head of the Knights. They became friends, and Jones became a dedicated union organizer and agitator.

Her strength was not organizational skills but inspiration. “No matter what impossible ideas she brought up,” one observer wrote, “she made the miners think she and they together could do anything.” Despite her small size, she was a strong and vocal union advocate. Workers affectionately called her “Mother” Jones.

Jones crisscrossed the country, helping workers wherever she thought she was needed. She supported striking railroad workers in Pittsburgh in 1877 and in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1894. She worked for miners in Pennsylvania from 1900 to

1902, in Colorado from 1903 to 1906, in Idaho in 1906, and back in Colorado in 1913 to 1914. Then she moved to New York City to support garment workers and streetcar workers.

She also staged clever events. During the 1902 coal strike, she led miners’ wives to march to a mine’s gates as nonstriking workers arrived for work. The women persuaded these miners to join the strike afterward. She planned another move the following year—a 22-day march of child workers from Pennsylvania to New York. Her goal was to show President Theodore Roosevelt the suffering caused by child labor. The march lost strength over time, and the president refused to see her. But the event won newspaper space that publicized the problem.

Revered by workers, she was feared and hated by management and law-enforcement officials. A West Virginia prosecutor called her “the most dangerous woman in America” because she could rouse workers to act. She was arrested many times and in 1913 was convicted on a trumped-up charge of conspiracy to murder that was later overturned.

She continued the fight throughout her long life, joining the steel strike of 1919 and helping coal miners in 1923—at age 93. In 1930, Jones received many honors on reaching 100. One congratulatory note came from millionaire businessman—and longtime foe—John D. Rockefeller. He praised Jones for “loyalty to your ideals.” Before the end of that year, though, Jones died. She was taken to Illinois, where she was laid to rest in the Union Miners Cemetery along with those who died in an 1898 mine riot.

## Questions

1. Do you think that Jones’s appearance helped her or hurt her in the effort to unionize?
2. Why did getting publicity help the union cause?
3. Why did management and law-enforcement officials fear Jones?